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Sociology Hesitant

W. E. B. Du Bois

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Sociology Hesitant

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The Congress of Arts and Sciences at St. Louis last summer served to emphasize painfully the present plight of Sociology; for the devotee of the cult made the strange discovery that the further following of his bent threatened violent personal dismemberment. His objects of interest were distributed quite impartially

under some six of the seven grand divisions of Science: economics, here; ethnology, there; a thing called “Sociology” hidden under Mental Science, and the things really sociological ranged in a rag-bag and labeled “Social Regulation.” And so on. **[End Page 37]**

A part of this confusion of field was inevitable to any attempt at classifying knowledge, but the major part pointed to a real confusion of mind as to the field and method of Sociology. For far more than forty years we have wandered in this sociological wilderness, lisping a peculiar patois, uttering fat books and yet ever conscious of a fundamental confusion of thought at the very foundations of our science—something so wrong that while a man boasts himself an Astronomer, and acknowledges himself a Biologist, he owns to Sociology only on strict compulsion and with frantic struggles.

And yet three things at the birth of the New Age bear weighty testimony to an increased and increasing interest in human deeds: the Novel, the Trust, and the Expansion of Europe; the study of individual life and motive, the machine-like organizing of human economic effort, and the extension of all organization to the ends of the earth. Is there a fairer field than this for the Scientist? Did not the Master Comte do well to crown his scheme of knowledge with Knowledge of Men?¹

Yet this was not exactly what he did, it was rather what he meant to do, what he and we long assumed he had done. For, steering curiously by the Deeds of Men as objects of scientific study and induction, he suggested a study of Society. And Society? The prophet really had a vision of two things, the vast and bewildering activities of men and lines of rhythm that coordinate certain of these actions. So he said: “Now in the inorganic sciences, the elements are much better known to us than the Whole which they constitute; so that in that case we must proceed from the simple to the compound. But the reverse method is necessary in the study of Man and of Society: Man and Society as a whole being better known to us, and more accessible subjects of study than the parts which constitute them.” And on this dictum has been built a science not of Human Action but of “Society,” a Sociology. Did Comte thus mean to fix scientific thought on the study of an abstraction? Probably not—rather he meant to call attention to the fact that amid the bewildering complexities of human life ran great highways of common likenesses and agreements in human thoughts and action, which world-long observation had already noted and pondered upon. Here we must start the new science, said the Pioneer, this is the beginning. Once having emphasized this point, however, and Comte was strangely hesitant as to the real elements of Society which must sometime be studied—were **[End Page 38]** they men or cells or atoms or something subtler than any of these? Apparently he did not answer but wandered on quickly to a study of “Society.” And yet “Society” was but an abstraction. It was as though Newton, noticing falling as characteristic of matter and explaining this phenomenon as gravitation, had straightway sought to study some weird entity known as Falling instead of soberly investigating Things which fall. So Comte and his followers noted the grouping of men, the changing of government, the agreement in thought, and then, instead of a minute study of men grouping, changing and thinking, proposed to study the Group, the Change, and the Thought and call this new created Thing Society.

Mild doubters as to this method were cavalierly hushed by Spencer’s...

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WEB Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat, the concession, as it may seem paradoxical, fuelled escapism.

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